

The Faculty of Music, University of Toronto

SPECIAL EVENTS

CONCERT HALL

EDWARD JOHNSON BUILDING

Thursday, December 12th, 1963

8:30 p.m.

Hungarian Quartet

ZOLTAN SZEKELY, Violin

MICHAEL KUTTNER, Violin

DENES KOROMZAY, Viola

GABRIEL MAGYAR, 'Cello

PROGRAMME

Quartet in F major, Opus 59, No. 1 - - Beethoven

Allegro

Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando

Adagio molto e mesto —

Thème russe: Allegro

This the first "Rasumovsky" quartet recalls such serene works of Beethoven as the Violin Concerto, the Sixth Symphony, and the Piano Concerto in G. The serenity, the classic beauty, and also the occasional pastoral suggestion may be accounted for by the extreme simplicity and purity of diatonic harmonies here.

The work opens with "a dangerously broad and symmetrical melody" (Tovey). "Nothing can be more quiet than the way in which such a melody will disengage itself from symmetry and broaden into something evidently part of a larger whole; and the process is as dramatic as it is quiet." One is always struck with the breadth and incomparable melodic quality of this opening — but also with how hard it is after hearing it to whistle past the first eight bars. It is indeed "part of a larger whole": the "larger whole" is its realization, its continuous unfolding in the course of this wonderful movement. Astonishing it is, also, that Beethoven's auditive imagination remained so very sensitive despite his tragic loss of hearing: for instance, it is the sheer sound of the floating tonic and dominant chords in the coda that so transports us.

The first movement is notable for several special features besides these general ones. An unmistakeable touch of strangeness is provided by the curious dialogue in sustained chords, evidently unrelated harmonically, which occurs three times. Possibly for the first time in a quartet, there is no formal close to the exposition. The development is on a broad scale almost equal to that in the Third Symphony, and embraces linear treatments of the main theme, animated figurational sections, a double fugato, and finally a suspenseful climbing passage in the first violin which by a master stroke leads to the reprise, not of the main theme but of one of its subordinates; the main theme follows.

The second movement is a totally unprecedented and fantastic kind of scherzo. The customary closed form of scherzo-and-trio is abandoned, and instead a very free sonata form evolves, with a wild succession of harmonies that even today is hair-raising enough to silence those who would call classical tonality a "restriction". A famous anecdote has it that the cellist at the first performance tore his part to bits and stamped on it when he saw what he had to play at the start. The opening is indeed not a theme at all: it is a rhythm, pounded out on one note, with a fragment of melody in answer to it. The rhythm dominates almost every part of the piece, with the exception of a recurring short passage marked *dolce*; the answering fragment is varied, expanded, harmonized and contrapuntalized within an inch of its existence.

The Adagio, in the minor, is essentially an emotional mood-piece of deep elegiac sorrow and pathos, decidedly written in the first person. The melody has its expressive downward sixth; semitone decorations give a sorrowing effect; pulsing anticipation-notes suggest a sighing quality. Less easily explained, here as in the first movement, are the miracles of texture — especially as the work of a deaf man. A cadenza for the first violin leads directly to the finale.

According to Czerny, "Beethoven pledged himself to weave a Russian melody into every quartet" of the Opus 59 series, in honor of Rasumovsky. In this work and the E minor Quartet (No. 2), the composer labels the borrowed material "Thème russe". A present-day musicologist tells us these themes were taken from "a collection of 150 Russian songs published in 1790 by Ivan Pratch". The Russian flavor of the theme in this case is instinct in its contours and in the harmonization Beethoven gives it in slow tempo just before the end. But again it is hard, after hearing, to whistle past its first few measures, without the aid of Mr. Pratch's forgotten volume. On the other hand, if one loses its melody, one is at least left vibrating with the vivid memory of its motives, so thoroughly do they pervade the piece.

Five Movements for String Quartet, Opus 5 - - - Webern

Heftig bewegt
Sehr langsam
Sehr bewegt
Sehr langsam
In zarter Bewegung

The quartet attracted Webern more than any other standard medium. A student quartet has been lost; two other works — the *Bagatelles*, Opus 9, and the *Quartet*, Opus 28 — postdate this one. The *Movements* were written in 1909 and are as expressionistic and atonal as most of Schoenberg's and Berg's music of that period. Webern's sudden, hyper-tense contrasts of semi-incoherent sound-bursts are equivalent to the "spontaneous" color-bursts of Kandinsky. (Webern, like Schoenberg, was associated with Kokoschka, Kandinsky, and other painters in the expressionist or *Blaue Reiter* school around this time.) "Atonal" was a bad word — at least with Berg; but, one suspects, with Webern too. Still, the overt technical intention in most of these pre-World-War-One works is avoidance of not just key-centres but also any groups of notes which might suggest major or minor triads. Expressionism explains the compression and intensity of these pieces from the emotional standpoint, while atonality gives a technical reason for their brevity. Just as their moods had to be short and violent so their sounds had to eschew conventional repetitions, the time-worn processes of key-insistence.

Schoenberg was much influenced by these Webern microcosms, as one can see in his *Pierrot Lunaire* and Opus 19 piano pieces of a few years later. As he once wrote of Webern: "Every glance can be extended to a poem, every sigh to a novel. But to express a novel by a single gesture, a happiness in a single breath — such concentration is to be found only where there is a corresponding basic stability."

The whole cycle takes under ten minutes to perform. The most substantial pieces are the first and fifth. The first, in the course of its two-and-a-half quick and dizzy minutes, encompasses a wild variety of expressions (the word "Ausdruck" — "expression" — occurs several times in the score), and in doing so draws into play almost every device of string performance: notes are plucked, attacked with the wood as well as hair of the bow, played as harmonics, on the bridge, on the finger-board, muted, unmuted; moreover, 27 different tempo-changes are noted for the 55 bars of this single movement, and the dynamic indications are far more profuse than that. If the second and fourth movements are

melodic dream-images, the third is an expressionistic version of the traditional will-o-the-wisp scherzo. The fifth, a more extended dream-piece, centres around two recurrent sounds — a low-cello pattern of thirds and a series of plucked chords.

- INTERMISSION -

Quartet in D minor, Opus Posthumous
("Death and the Maiden") - - Schubert

Allegro

Andante con moto

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Presto

This work, completed in 1826, is a peak in the literature of the string quartet: not only because of its tremendous popularity and monumental character but because of its literary implications, rare in chamber music literature. The use of a section of his song, "Death and the Maiden", in the second movement suggests that Schubert used the subject of Death to create unity of mood throughout the work. But those critics who seem to detect in the sequence of movements a programmatic breakdown of a literary subject into four aspects are merely speculating. It would be truer to say that it is the traditional personality of each movement, the first dynamic and heroic, the second lyrical, the third rhythmic and the last quick and light, that determines the various aspects of the one basic mood which dominates this quartet.

The motivic unity of the first movement is achieved by a descending triplet figure that is heard again and again in varying meanings: at the opening of the work as a towering gesture, much in the manner of the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, immediately afterwards in a wistful pianissimo, and soon restlessly tossed from instrument to instrument. The second subject, in contrast to the rhythmic precision of the first, is one of those long drawn-out fairy-tale melodies of Schubert's. But soon the mood of strife and excitement grips its melodic figure and passages of contrapuntal character follow. Schubert's polyphony recalls little of Bach but foreshadows much of Wagner, with its simultaneous appearance of motives distinct rather than complementary in character and rhythm.

The Andante con moto presents a series of variations on the "Death and the Maiden" music, each sharply distinguished in character. The violin leads in the first variation, the cello in the second. Elsewhere all instruments participate equally, sometimes as four distinct individuals, sometimes in pairs.

The interest of the Scherzo lies largely in its irregular rhythmic accents. The use of a descending motive of four notes recalls the germ motive of the first movement, while the Trio recalls in its melody the end of the variation theme.

The finale, a whirlwind Presto, gallops along in a hurried frenzy until it is interrupted by a series of heavy chords — a splendid effect — which are followed once again by the descending figure of the first movement. The ending shows orchestral proportions well justified in a chamber work of such emotional intensity and expansive structure.

Program notes: HELMUT KALLMANN, JOHN BECKWITH